

[Review] Tim Bartley, Sebastian Koos, Hiram Samel, Gustavo Setrini and Nik Summers (2015) Looking behind the label: global industries and the conscientious consumer

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Bartley, T., Koos, S., Samel, H., Setrini, G. and Summers, N. (2015) *Looking behind the Label: Global Industries and the Conscientious Consumer*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Review by Eleftheria J. Lekakis

One of the best-kept secrets of consumer capitalism remains its impact on global production. Behind each commodity label lie shortcuts to information on the level of production. Besides ingredients and country of manufacturing, labels conceal trade, political and social histories and, since global industries operate under the profit-motive, labels aim to guarantee quality, but also simplify origin. Yet, struggles for trade justice, labour and human rights have pushed for market commitments towards fairness, sustainability and other ethical concerns. This book engages with traditions of scholarship on ethical consumption and corporate standards with conceptual clarity and a wealth of evidence across different industry sectors. It maps the literature on ‘conscientious consumerism’ (also known as ethical consumption or theorised as political consumerism) and explores its consequences at the point of production. Through the scrutiny of labelling schemes, this book addresses key economic, political, social and environmental concerns around globalisation and argues that “conscientious consumerism as an ideology is regressive and counterproductive, but specific practices of conscientious consumption can sometimes be consistent with other forms of political engagement” (p. 31). Furthermore, it argues that different production models cannot be generalised with regards to ethical standards and exposes different cases to highlight the complexity of global industries.

The book is divided in two parts. The first constructs the conceptual and empirical framework with regards to a quantitative approach to negative (boycotting) and positive (‘buycotting’) choices in consumption among American and European consumers and questions such data to national economic, political and cultural contexts. In terms of key motivations and beliefs that shape conscientious consumption, the authors identify post-materialist values, while they also highlight other factors such as social class, gender and location. Across national contexts, they suggest that there are three types of “opportunity structures” for conscientious consumption: a) political, referring to how states and social movements promote this to citizens, b) economic, referring to “the country’s affluence and availability of alternative products” (p. 52) and c) cultural, referring to the collective meanings and understandings of conscientious consumption which, according to the authors, are less traceable and thus matter less at the national level. Their analysis also elucidates what other research has also demonstrated with regards to the global distribution of ethical consumption: a picture of global unevenness (Lekakis, 2013; Stolle and Micheletti, 2013).

The second part of the book shifts its focus to global production and the impact of industry standards “on the ground” in four global industries: wood and paper, food, apparel and footwear and electronics. A wealth of evidence on the growth of corporate standards in these is presented through case study material, interviews with local actors and information

on the organisation of production. A study of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in the tropical forests of Indonesia outlines how it rose as the most credible label, but also how influence of the local context and the ways in which its impact has been limited particularly towards deforestation. A study of sugar and soy production in Paraguay explores how the commodity round-table approach can promote Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), but also how it can reproduce top-down power dynamics and hinder alternative models of production from growing. A study of labour justice in the apparel and footwear industries shows that the puzzle of rules is more complex in the case of sweatshops and that there are few meaningful alternatives to global brands. Finally, a study of the fast-growing electronics demonstrates some resistance to change as is heralded the forefront of business innovation. Overall, the book offers a careful approach to the complex relationship between ethical concerns of consumption choices and their outcomes on different production models.

This approach is supported by strong evidence. The authors present a sophisticated attempt to understand what they call ‘conscientious consumerism’ “*in context*” (p. 59, italics in original), offering an innovative approach to the study of the politics of consumption. Yet, one thing that can be noticed is that they move past the rich scholarship on political consumerism summarily. For example, they posit that Ulrich Beck is “perhaps the most prominent theorist of consumption as a form of politics” (p. 17), a statement which they do not qualify, while they propose that some authors “have celebrated conscientious consumption as an empowering form of ‘individualized collective action’ (Micheletti 2003)” (p. 59). While the first part of the book offers a clear mapping of key myths around ethical consumption, there is some confusion in the conflation of scholarship on individualization and (political) consumption, when the authors write that “conscientious consumption is not entirely individualized after all” (p. 59). Given the controversy of the terms, Stolle and Micheletti have clarified that it is “important to keep in mind that individualization and therefore individualized responsibility-taking differ theoretically from individualism” (2013: 26). The aim of individualized responsibility-taking is, thus, to conceptualise political participation through consumption rather than celebrate consumption as political participation. Given the wealth of theoretical and empirical scholarship on consumption as a form of political participation, the concept of ‘conscientious consumerism’ does not challenge existing debates fully.

However, this work is illuminating of the interactions of the level of global production and consumption as conscientious consumerism is complemented by a cross-examination with the complex and contingent labelling schemes and industry standards. The framework which the authors set for unpacking the relationship between global consumption with a conscience and different production projects, features four coherent and helpful factors: a) organisational structures of production and consumption, b) constituencies and standards (originating from or applied to global industries), c) the interplay between global and local in ‘localized globalisms’ and ‘globalized localisms’ (Santos, 2006), and d) the compliance and deviation from rules. These four factors are outlined in each case study chapter, giving clarity and consistency to a complex landscape of global industries. This work is exceptional in illustrating that “local sites of implementation are not ‘empty spaces’ that merely receive

global standards; they are rich social orders, where global standards layer onto preexisting systems of power, inequality, and governance” (p. 210). As a collaborative project, *Looking behind the Label* benefits from the combined interdisciplinary expertise, making this a valuable contribution to the social sciences. The book aspires to provide its readers with “a clearer sense of the structure and operation of global value chains, the varied geographies of production, and the circumscribed consequences of eco-labels and social labels” (p. 33) and succeeds in doing so. There is ground-breaking research on older as well as newer industry sectors. Reading this book can be an eye-opening experience for a variety of audiences from students of various levels to academics teaching and researching across the social sciences.

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